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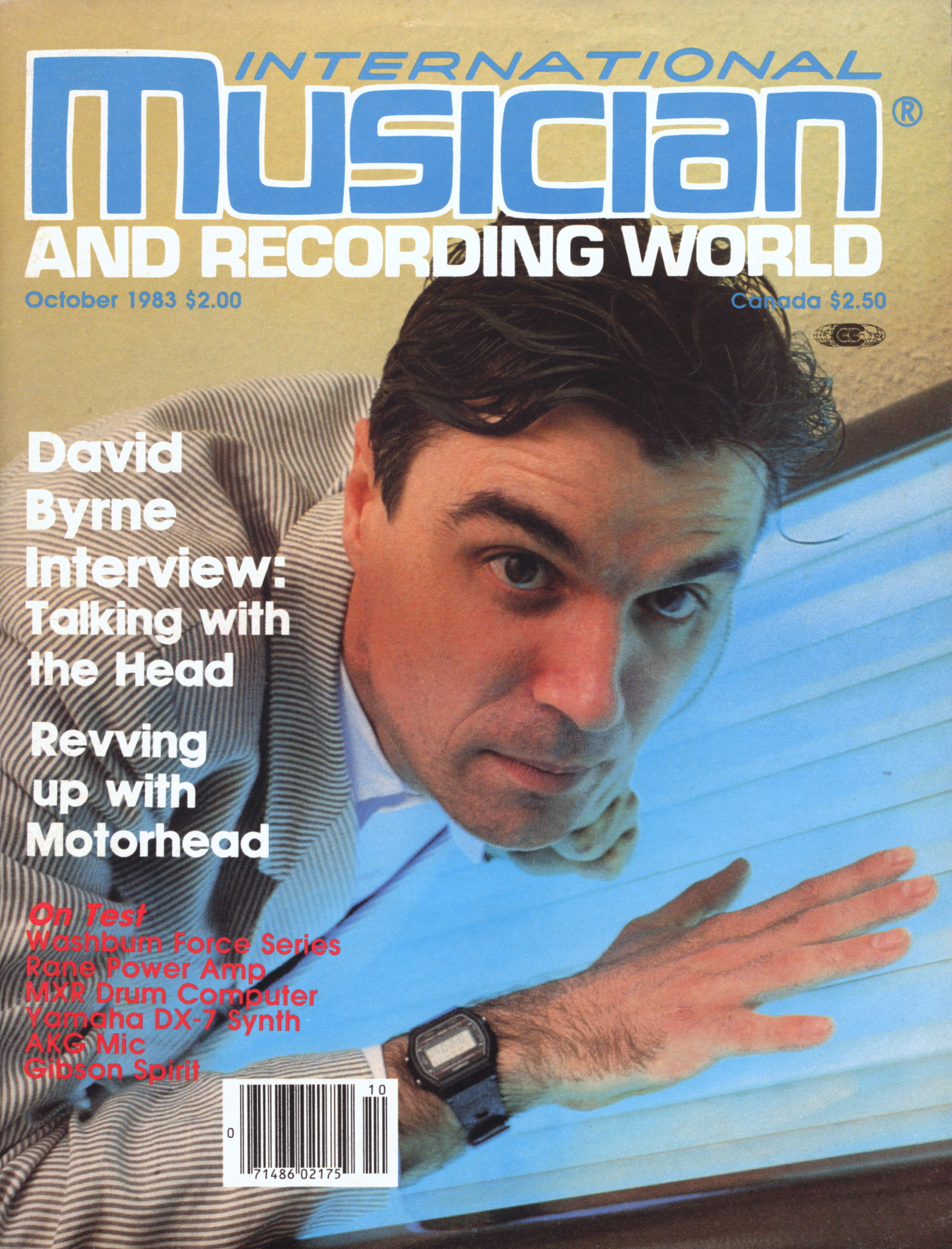

## David Byrne Interview: Talking with the Head

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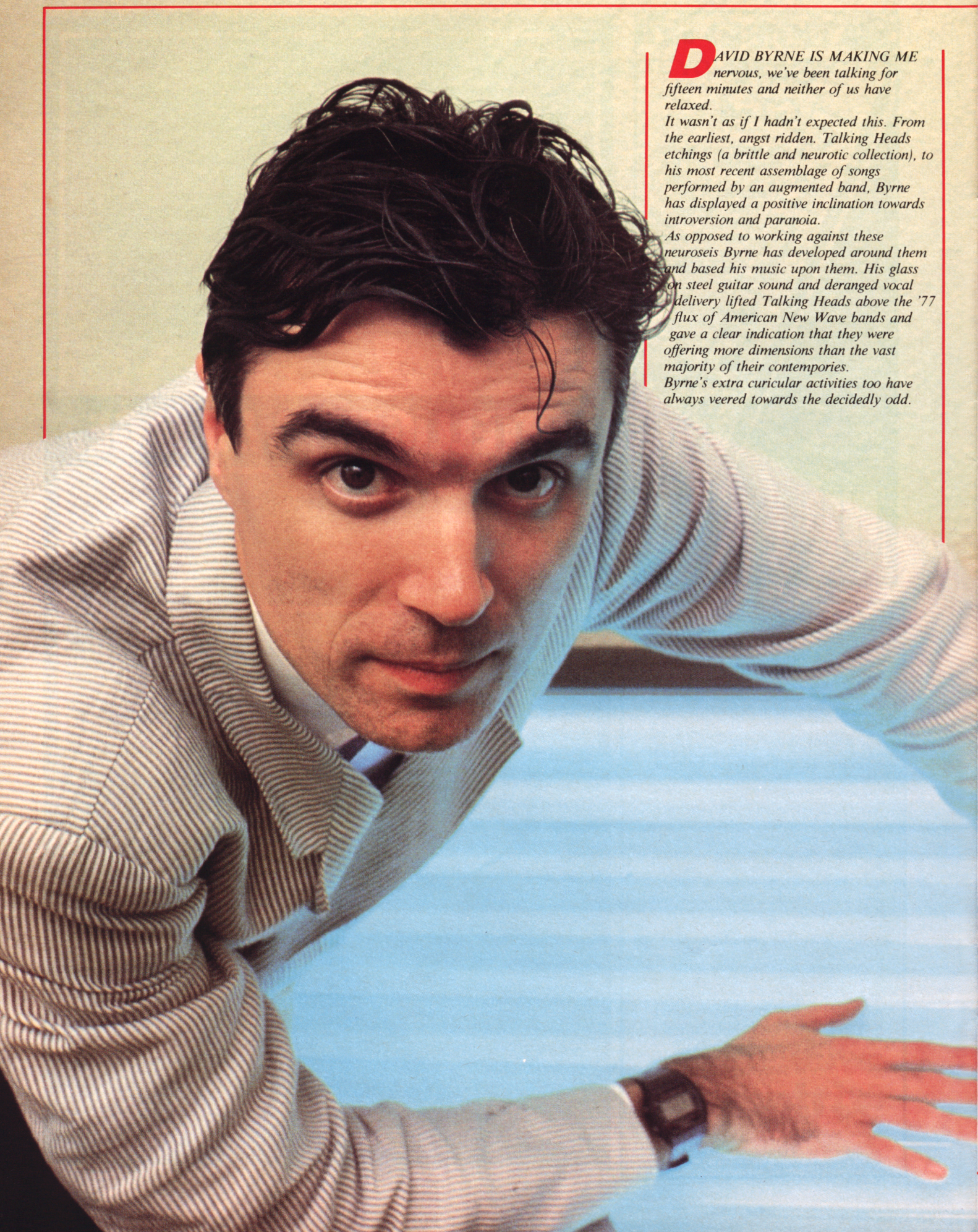


*DAVID BYRNE IS MAKING ME nervous, we've been talking for fifteen minutes and neither of us have relaxed.*

*It wasn't as if I hadn't expected this. From the earliest, angst ridden. Talking Heads etchings (a brittle and neurotic collection), to his most recent assemblage of songs performed by an augmented band, Byrne has displayed a positive inclination towards introversion and paranoia.*

*As opposed to working against these neuroseis Byrne has developed around them and based his music upon them. His glass on steel guitar sound and deranged vocal delivery lifted Talking Heads above the '77 flux of American New Wave bands and gave a clear indication that they were offering more dimensions than the vast majority of their contempories.*

*Byrne's extra curicular activities too have always veered towards the decidedly odd.*

# David Byrne

## Wherein the head Head speaks with Adrian Deevoy on the life, times, ruminations, and expectations of a (dare it be said?) Pop star in the '80s. All photos by Adrian Boot.

*His manic collaboration with Twyla Tharpe came to fruition on* Songs From The Catherine Wheel, *a dislocated score for a ballet of the same name. This met with public bemusement as did his Afro-Electrique collage,* My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts *project with synthesizer guru Brian Eno, who had produced the early Talking Heads albums.*

*His own career as a producer, honed by work on his own material, officially began when he fingered the faders on the B52's third album* Messopotania *and recently peaked when he stripped down the Fun Boy Three sound for their* Waiting *LP.*

*Our interview has been squeezed into his last day of editing the Talking Heads Channel 4 audio visual pastiche* A Big Face Is Hard To See *and David Byrne is crumpled, wan and edgy. Our conversation is erratic and half hearted. Then, as if by divine intervention, David Byrne stands up, moves to the window, returns to his seat, apologises and begins talking.*

**Did you ever envisage yourself achieving the success you have to date?**

Yeah, but I thought it would take an awful lot longer. The thing was when we started it seemed to me that very few people were actually singing or even speaking about me and my peers and generation and I thought anyone who came out and spoke to me and my group was bound to succeed. No matter what it is, as soon as people find something that they can relate to they snap it up. I mean then you either had glitter groups or the mega Pop bands and the only things that were really interesting were black groups and black music like Kool and the Gang, Earth, Wind and Fire, Funkadelic . . . around that time the American radio was a real wasteland.

**Do you think *Speaking 'n Tongues* sees a reversion back to the Pop song?**

Yes, exactly. In a sense I thought that we'd start out doing things that were closer to Pop songs—or at least they had that sound. Whether they were or not is sort of beside the point. Then we kinda got away from all that and I thought we'd lost something in the process and I thought it'd be good to get that back again.

**Is the Pop song something you relate to easily?**

Yeah, it's something that I relate to pretty easily, I think most people do—you know it's the sort of thing you sing to yourself in the shower. The Pop song is the media that I have learnt almost as a craft. I don't think I'm a classic songwriter but I've learnt to do it a little bit. I don't find it that easy, I mean I couldn't write a song about say . . . that truck. I could try but it's kinda silly to write about things like that (laughs). I'd write a commercial song but it'd have to have something a little bit unusual about it, something that made you look at it in a different way and made you aware of what you were hearing. I find that I like to do that with all my work, it's all a bit distanced, but I think it's possible for us to do that and have some commercial success.

**Why did you choose Compass Point as a studio for *Speaking In Tongues*, it doesn't seem your style?**

Well we mainly went to Nassau for a few overdubs and some of the mixing. We chose it partly because Chris (Franz and Tina (Weymouth) live there and also because it's a good studio. It's difficult to, as we did, use other musicians, because you don't want to bring them down all that way—it gets kind of expensive.

**The whole band have been credited for writing the music on *Speaking In Tongues*. Was this a conscious effort to reinstate the band as songwriters?**

Yes it was. For this record we wrote all the music by the group improvising and collecting the improvisations. It was very time consuming but it got the band playing together again.

**What have you thought of the other Talking Heads solo projects, Jerry Harrison's *Red And The Black* and Chris and Tina's Tom Tom Club?**

*Continued . . .*

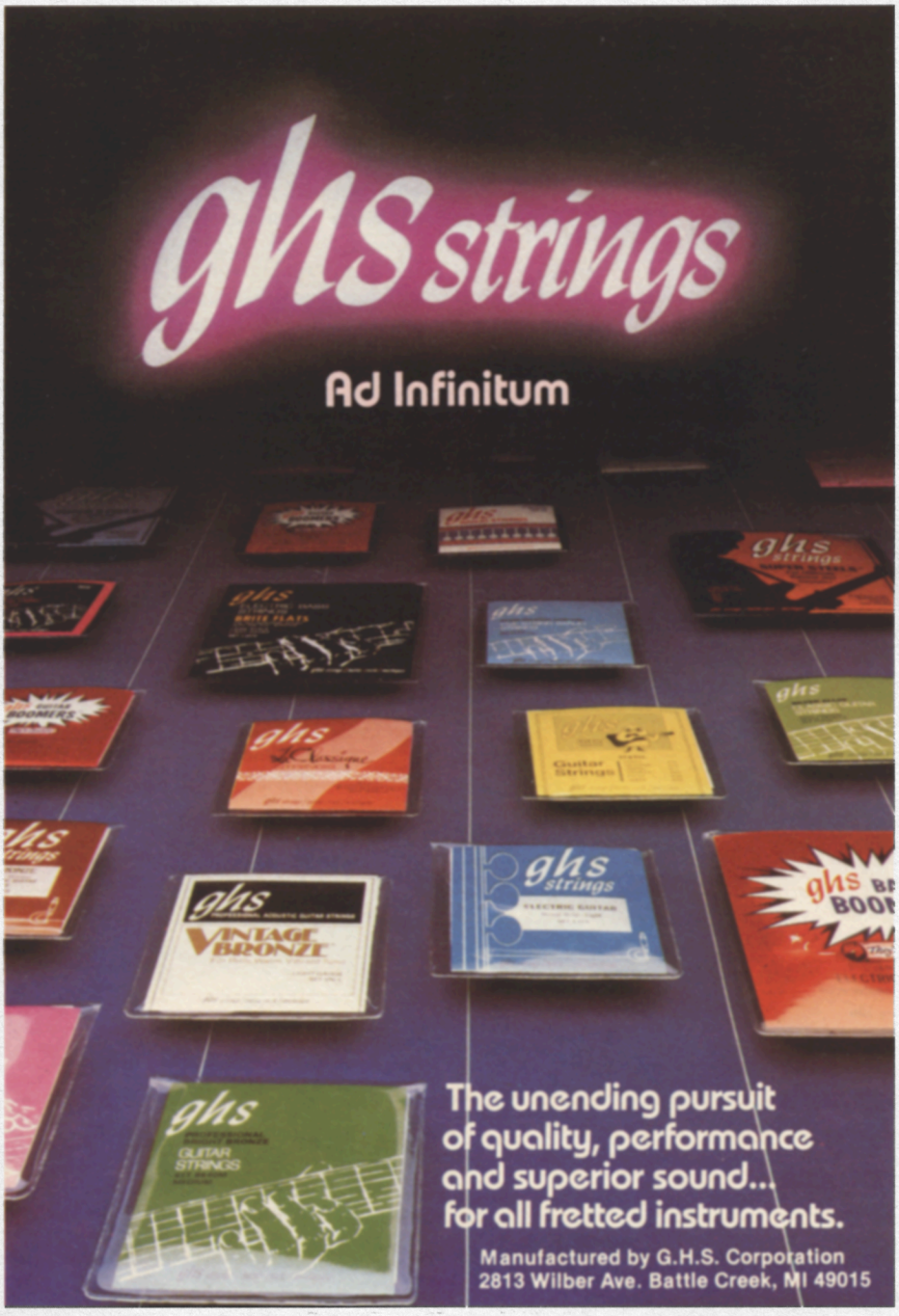
*Head shots by Adrian Booth*

I think they've done okay, I think Tom Tom Club has done great. Actually it worked out really well because when we got back together and played it was as if everybody suddenly realised, 'Hey we really enjoy playing together' and everyone complements each other as a musician because they are fresh and they've learnt from their own projects. There was a bit of tension but I guess that period where we all did our respective solo projects really did help and we'll probably do it again. It also keeps your relationship from becoming stale and it keeps us from getting at each other's throats.

**You've written your first love song on the new album—was that difficult?**
It was very difficult to write, it took about four tries. Previous attempts have always been terrible, real cliches. Everybody does things like that and it's so hard to avoid.

**Why haven't you written songs like** *This Must Be The Place (Naive Melody)* **before?**
Because er . . . I haven't really felt that way much . . . I guess I don't feel like that very much.

**I thought the line 'the less we talk about it the better' was particularly poignant.**




Oh but that's a real cliche. It's not an extraordinary thought or idea. Lots of people say things like that. Barry Manilow says things like that. People just say the same things when they fall in love. After a while you find that those things are true anyway and you can't get away from them.

**Even though it's a love song it's still tinged with paranoia ('and you love me till my heart stops, love me till I'm dead'). Is paranoia your favourite hobby? Do David Byrne lyrics have to have a twist to them?**
Yeah they do but I'm trying to resist doing that these days.
I don't think lyrics have to be anything else but 'I love you baby'. Well there's no duty to make lots of statememts in songs. There's ways in which you can write love songs that although you use the language of a love song you can actually speak about lots of other kinds of emotions, jealousy, paranoia. But I feel that words for me have to go off at tangents and make you think about something other than somebody and his girlfriend.

**Do you still write songs in the same way as you did for your Southbank Show documentary—mumbling ideas into a portable tape recorder?**
I only did a couple of songs like that, ha ha how did it look? I often try different techniques to try and get different sounds and different textures. There seems to be one formula that dominates on each record. On this last record I tended to collect phrases and write them all out, phrases of four or five words—one liners—and fill pages full of them and then scatter them all over my desk and then group together ones that seemed somehow linked. I did that for months until something seemed to emerge. Sometimes the connection between two unrelated lines inspired something completely new that I hadn't thought of before.

**What happened to change you from a nervous introverted frontman into the gregarious showman who fronted a twelve piece band and leapt all over Wembley last year?**
Well, that's the kind of feeling that the larger band inspired in me. The nature of the performance reflects from being in a small band or a large band. In a small band it's more tense and it's wrapped up inside of me, so it's about sort of personal gestures instead of jumping all around. It's a wonderful feeling playing with a big band, you should try it some time. Just get a lot of people you know to bang on things.
It's a completely different feeling, I become a singer and a frontman. In a way I tend to lose myself in the music, but it's less personal and I get less involved with projecting what I'm feeling. I think I have to admit to myself that I

am a performer. Performing is what I do. It's no use pretending that I'm just a li'l guy up there singing my songs. In the beginning I thought that we were just musicians performing our songs and that the performance aspect of that was completely beside the point.

**Was your guitar something to hide behind in the earlier days?**

Yes, really I've just come out from behind it. It's difficult—you don't know what to do with your hands. I think the best thing to do is play with the mike stand.

**How has your guitar sound evolved?**

I don't know. The sound for guitar that I heard on record that first struck me was on a James Brown song, *Cold Sweat* and it was very brittle. It sounded a bit like (hits biro on Perrier bottle) that, and it was completely different in approach to the guitar as an instrument and it sounded great; very tough but also very tight.

**And that percussive style . . .?**

I think it started when I first picked up a guitar because for a while I was in a band in Junior High School, I must have been about 14 or 15. Anyway we used to play Rolling Stones and Beatles songs and when all that ended, which it did pretty quickly, I was playing these songs at home on my guitar, and as I didn't belong to a band anymore I had to play the rhythm guitar and lead guitar parts and the beat simultaneously. So I used to bang my thumb on the fretboard while I was playing to get a hi hat pattern going. So I'd be playing everything on the one guitar in the way that a lounge pianist does . . . here's the violins, here's the melody . . .

I had to pare it down a little bit when I started playing in a band again because that sort of thing really gets in the way.

**Were you ever a Rock guitarist?**

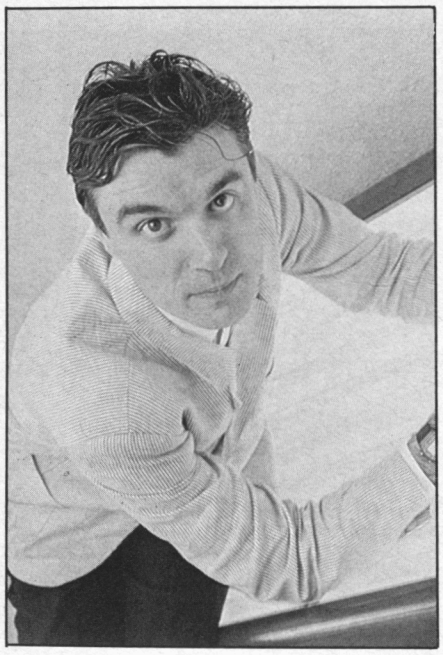
Yeah, I did that for a while, I had a distortion thing for a while or I played through a tape recorder or something. But I suppose everyone does that some time. It was just then that everybody wanted to be in a Pop band.

**Are you a dexterous guitarist now?**

No, not so much. But each to his own I guess. Alex (Weir) the rhythm guitar player in the band often doesn't know the names of the chords he's playing but he just listens and moves his fingers into familiar patterns and gets something. We'll be playing something and I'll say, 'Alex, what key is this in?' and he'll say 'Oh I don't know man' and he can play absolute circles around me.

Occasionally I can do something well but there's people who can do it better than you . . . they normally live in L.A.

It always seems that you can walk down the street and sing something to yourself but when it comes to playing it on the guitar it never sounds the same as the idea as you had in your head.



**"I think I have to admit to myself that I am a performer. Performing is what I do. It's no use pretending that I'm just a li'l guy up there singing my songs."**

**Your vocal phrasing has always been very unusual.**

Do you think so? I don't know. I wasn't aware of that. I do go across rhythms because that can create another rhythm, although that's something that comes quite naturally to me. My hearing must be different when it comes to my own singing. It's similar to hearing your voice for the first time on tape, it's never the same as you'd imagine.

I used to imagine that I had a melodious singing voice but when I heard it . . . it sounded like a shriek. But I go on deceiving myself.

I think I'm getting better now, I can sing lower and I think I'm getting a little closer to this melodious vision I have of myself. That's what I think anyway.

I'd like to be a great singer but some of the people that I think are great singers have quite limited voices. Like Willie Nelson, I think he's a good singer . . . no he's probably more of a song stylist.

**Have you seen a progression between the Talking Heads' albums?**

I guess there has been. I always wish that we could do a lot of styles simultaneously. As if to say we could just as easily do this as something, like a very mellow record and then a very tense record or a Funky dance record like the new one.

**You didn't use Brian Eno as a producer on** *Speaking In Tongues.*

No, we didn't we didn't use him this time. It was time to do it ourselves. I did miss him occasionally and I'd like to work with him again myself, whether the band will or not I'm not sure but he's good to work with.

**If you did collaborate with Eno again would the result be in the same vein as** *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts?*

No, I don't think so, other people can do that now. I think we sorta cleared the way for them to do their own things.

**Would you say that My Life . . . is your finest work to date?**

Yeah, I'm really proud of it. It took a couple of months to record, but we spent a long time beforehand listening to records and things off the radio.

I don't actually think we recorded any of it live, it was all taken from the radio and stuff. It would have taken ages to have recorded all of that stuff, we'd have had to go all that way to the Lebanon for the mountain singing and we still wouldn't have known whether it was going to work or not.

I was moderately pleased with the reaction to it although my perception of it was, although this was probably more in the mixing, but I thought some of the things on *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* were pretty Funky dance numbers. I was surprised that they didn't have more success in discos but I guess people like to hear things sung in English.

We worked pretty well hand in hand on it. Sometimes we'd take turns in doing things, not intentionally but just by the nature of the way we worked. Brian might be banging on something in the studio and so I'd be in the position then of listening to what he was doing and then I could think 'now this would go with that' or 'that sound would go well with that'. Then I'd record something and Brian would be in that objective postion. I think the fact that both of us had an affinity for ethnic music helped because we were exchanging records and stuff that we'd found prior to making the record. Brian's good to work with as a producer too because it's good to work with somebody who might make interesting records, but I also like working with strange characters.

**Are you as competent a producer as Eno who's a more established sound person?**

What kind of a question is that? (laughs) I have a pair of ears. Does that mean good I make the sound of a train into a hit record? I don't know . . . I'm conversant with the technicalities and all that.

**Why did you choose to work with the Fun Boy Three?**

*Continued . . .*

They asked me . . . and I liked their first record, I liked a lot of the songs on it. I think their ethnicity had something to do with it, or rather their music's ethnicity. They also had that feeling of not being too well formed, they didn't seem to work within a rigid pattern and that seemed kinda nice. They were willing to try anything out, they were pretty open.

**It wasn't the intense battle of wits that everybody expected?**

No, they were fun. Not fun in the jumping about sense. They were fun but quiet. It's funny, the B52s were a really quiet bunch too. I suppose things are always the opposite to what you expect.

**Were you offered other production work in the wake of *Waiting* and *Messopotania?***

Some things yes. But *Messopotania* didn't do very well commercially and that was after they'd had so much success! A few people approached me after that, I won't bother going into names, but some of them have been quite successful commercial artists. But my feeling was that by working with me they might run the risk of a drastic drop in sales.

**You've remixed *The Pressure Of Life* to get the Funboys some American airplay—what are the major differences between the markets?**

In America there's a split in the radio between white and black radio or black radio and R&B radio, whatever you want to call it, and it's quite possible for a song to be successful in one chart and not even dent the other one and so you sort of aim for one market because things have to be made to appeal to one half of the market and not the other.

**How do you feel about the current British artists plagiarising your style?**

I think some of it sounds real nice. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. In many cases they've been more successful than we have. That makes me jealous. But I find it difficult to keep up. There seems to be a lot of music to listen to.

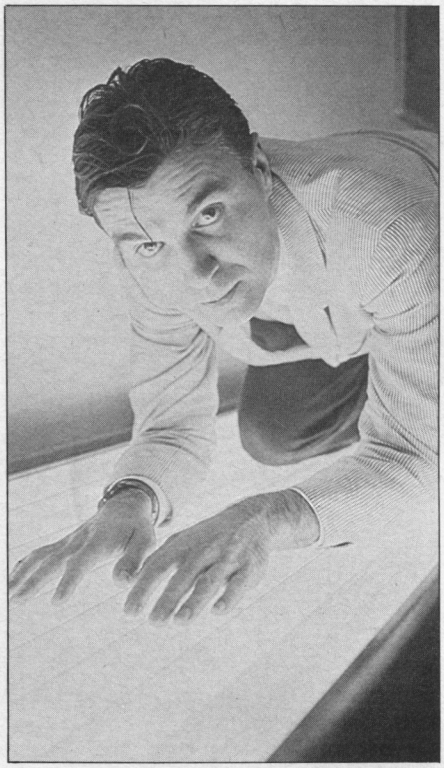
Things like *Don't You Want Me Baby,* I quite liked that when it was out, the sounds on it were good but the lyrics were terrible. I thought 'Gee, I can do better than that'. . . and that was the band that did *Being Boiled?* That's quite a transition.

**What music do you listen to at home?**

Oh I listen to dance music and I dance around to that and I listen to music to relax to.

**What does David Byrne relax to?**

(Laughs) Oh you know ballads and classical music and some ethnic music. I think people have this vision of me sitting at home smoking my pipe listening to tapes of puppies being tortured. . . .



**"I think people have this vision of me sitting at home smoking my pipe listening to tapes of puppies being tortured"**

**Would it be fair to call you a dabbler?**

If you like. It has a bad implication but I don't see these things that supposedly fall into different medias as being that separate. You just take the working process that you've learned in one field and apply it to another. So it's not as if you're trying your hand at something else, you're putting something you know to use in a different way.

**Do you see video as an important form of media?**

Yes, in a sense it's a performance. You get a basic structure and hang things on it so sure, it's important, and also very enjoyable—tiring but artistically rewarding. The *Once In A Lifetime* video was based on the body movements and gestures of preachers and people who go into trances and that sort of thing. Toni Basil and myself tried to formularise it and make it into a dance out of those spasms and things. It took a lot of rehearsals, the dancing part of it was meant to be a sort of halfway point between dance and a series of muscular spasms.

**Are the new Talking Heads as a large show band the antithesis of the original idea?**

Mmm, and now we have to try and get some of the old feeling back again. I'd really like to go from one style to another, have some stuff with just the four piece and other stuff with the full group. A small band can work in clubs and some theatres but I don't think it can work in large venues, it gets difficult to keep it personal.

**But don't the older songs with personal themes lose their essence when played by a large band?**

After a while those songs leave you with a choice of either rearranging them for a big group or dropping them completely from the set. But those kind of songs live a life of their own as songs anyway. If it's a decent song then it lives almost apart from whatever current concerns the band has.

**I think older songs like *Psycho Killer* suffer in their current interpretation.**

It does, it's certainly not the same. I think we'll strip it down a bit next time we play, and some of the other stuff we'll make bigger. We'll mix it up.

**You seem to listen and participate in all types of music, do you have any parameters?**

Oh yeah sure, I hate Mozart, ha ha ha!

**What's lined up for the immediate future?**

Well we're touring the States in August and I'm involved in doing a theatre piece that's to be performed at the Olympics, but that won't be done for about a year. When I get back home we're going to start the video for *Burning Down the House,* I guess that'll be the single but I'm not sure. I would've chosen *Naive Melody* or *Slippery People.* When I wrote *Naive Melody* I thought 'Gee this should be a single' but that shows you what I know about making commercial music.

**Are you happy David?**

I'm happy sometimes, not all the time but a good amount of the time. People expect me to be tortured and not happy. I was given a shock recently though. I did an interview for Italian television and they replayed it just to check out camera angles and what not. So I really saw myself sitting and talking and attempting to look happy and natural. It was really weird, I looked like a bird. What a shock. My eyes and head were darting about all over the place. I think you forget that you have those little quirks.

And with that he stands up, stares like a rabbit caught in the glare of a headlight and mumbles a parting thought which I miss. He replaces his crumpled jacket and leaves for the cinema.

David Byrne, same as he ever was.

**Adrian Deevoy**

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